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CLASSICAL LITERATURE THROUGH ENGLISH TRANSLATIONS

EDWARD O. SISSON
University of Washington

In the sixteenth century Melanchthon, the father of German humanistic schools, wrote an essay, not devoid of pathos, entitled *De miseriis pedagogorum*, in which among other things he bewails the *stupor pedagogicus* which descends upon the unhappy pupils through their “measureless labor and weariness in learning the Latin tongue.” He laments the fate of the German as compared with the Greek who needed not to learn a strange tongue, but, as soon as he could read and write, went straightway to the study of science and philosophy. About a hundred years later, the bright chief of English humanists, Milton himself, complains that “we do amiss to spend seven or eight years in scraping together so much miserable Latin and Greek as might be learned otherwise easily and delightfully in one year.” “Language,” he further declares, “is but the instrument conveying to us things useful to be known.”¹ He agreed then with Melanchthon’s opinion, that “Latin and Greek are not culture, but only the gate thereto.” Unfortunately, the “easy and delightful” method of learning Latin in one year has never been realized in practice, at least for ordinary mortals.

Since those days the status of culture has greatly changed: the vernacular tongues of Germany, England, and other European countries, which then were despised as incompetent and unfit for the embodying of any true literature or science, have risen to proud eminence in all branches of human thought. Particularly vital to our present theme is the fact that all the greatest classical works, for the sake of which the early humanists endured the “measureless toil of learning Latin,” have been rendered by master-hands into the native and current languages of the civilized countries. Yet,

¹ *Tractate on Education*, p. 118. (Cassell, London, 1904.)

strange to say, the evils of which Melanchthon and Milton complain still exist; pupils in our schools still suffer from the ravages of the *stupor pedagogicus*, and still "through long continued chase after words, lose the power to comprehend thoughts." As in Melanchthon's time, so in ours, the study of the Latin and Greek languages, which should be the doorway of admission to classic culture, too often proves instead a gate to bar out. This, we maintain, occurs in three ways. First and chiefest, vast quantities of time are devoured in the endeavor to master the languages, and thus the literatures are almost completely neglected. Secondly, the mastery of the language is, in all but a vanishing minority of cases, so far from perfect that the pupil gets little insight into the author's meaning, less into his style, and none into the true literary charm and beauty. Finally, the *stupor pedagogicus* becomes too often an *odium clas sicum*—a deep aversion to everything savoring of the languages which have formed such a long and tedious task.

As to the second and third of these indictments, I have little to say; they are old enough, and have been often and vigorously urged, and as vigorously opposed; I can only add a personal testimony which is the outcome of many years of teaching the two classical languages and observing the results of the teaching of others. As to the matter of time I wish to say a few words.

Let us take the case of a lad who studies Latin the usual time in a public secondary school, daily for four years; this makes, roughly, 150 weeks; we may fairly reckon one hour daily for work outside of the recitation. In the natural course of his Latin work he would "take," first, a year's lessons upon matter of no real literary value; then Caesar's *Gallic War* or material of somewhat similar quality and quantity; then from four to six books of the *Aeneid*, and six or seven *Orations* of Cicero. Upon these his 150 weeks have been expended.

What might he have done with translations? The following list is given merely as a suggestion of the sort of diet which he might enjoy, without the least idea that it is the best selection possible; let every classical scholar find abundant fault with the selection, and so add strength to my main contention.

Plutarch: ten selected <i>Lives</i>	8 weeks
Homer: <i>Odyssey</i> entire	8 "
<i>Iliad</i> entire	8 "
Xenophon: <i>Anabasis</i> and selections from the <i>Hellenica</i> and <i>Cyropedia</i>	10 "
Plato: <i>Apology</i> and <i>Crito</i>	5 "
Caesar: <i>Gallic War</i> , <i>Civil War</i>	10 "
Three or four Greek plays	6 "
Vergil: <i>Aeneid</i> entire; selections from <i>Georgics</i> and <i>Bucolics</i>	8 "
Hesiod: selections from <i>Works</i> and <i>Days</i>	5 "
Herodotus: selections	5 "
Cicero: select <i>Orations</i> and <i>Letters</i> , <i>De amicitia</i> , <i>De sen- ectute</i>	10 "
Seneca: <i>Morals</i> (selections)	4 "
Tacitus: <i>Annals</i> , <i>Germanica</i> (selections)	5 "
Horace, Juvenal, Plautus (selections)	10 "
Marcus Aurelius: selections	5 "
Epictetus: selections	3 "
Thucydides: selections	5 "
Aristotle: <i>Constitution of Athens</i> , and selections	5 "
Pliny: selections	5 "
Minor poets and dramatists	5 "
Greek and Roman literary history, art, architecture, mythol- ogy, religion, politics, private life, industry and com- merce, social systems	20 "

The above plan allows amply for the student to read the works named in his hours of private study, and for the teacher to explain and discuss them in the recitation hour, and when necessary to quiz the class upon what they have read. Let it not be forgotten that the time which suffices for this noble survey of actual classical literature is merely the amount commonly given to Latin alone; for those who would take Greek also one-half to two-fifths as much more might be added to the above list, and the time given from the latter part of the secondary course, when the mind is matured and strengthened by the discipline of the earlier years.

By such a plan might the high-school student gain a real and living acquaintance with the master-works of the ancient world—the very thing for which Melanchthon and Milton labored; in weighing the question we must not forget that the great majority of high-school pupils never enter college; indeed, many of them do not

complete the high-school course. When they devote themselves to the study of the Latin language, they simply sacrifice precious years to the acquisition of a tool for a task which they never lay hand to; the tool, poor enough at best, quickly rusts away to nothingness. Moreover, of those who go to college after having spent four years on Latin in the high school, many do not elect Latin, but thank their stars that they are finally done with it; and, alas! some who do take it, upon compulsion perhaps, find other doors to the needed "credit" in Latin than their supposed mastery of the language for which they have paid so dear; in other words, those English renderings of the classics which might have been virtuous companions and entertainers, as well as sources of wisdom and culture, become the student's accomplices in an academic misdemeanor.

I have tried here merely to show reasons for believing that the use of translations of the classics would do far better service to classic culture than the present plan of dragging the pupil through the thorny wilderness of the language. I do not mean to imply the view that the above list, or any similar list from the Greek and Latin literatures, is the most valuable substitute for the years of language study; many other branches of possible high-school study must be listened to. I am not unaware that I am silent regarding what is by some held to be the most cogent argument for the study of Latin and Greek—discipline. This is one point upon which I am quite willing to think with the humanists of the Renaissance, and with the Greeks, who thought it waste labor to repeat childhood in learning a new tongue. There is much suggestion in the words of Plutarch upon his own experience in learning Latin: "It was not so much by the knowledge of words that I came to the understanding of things, as by my experience of things I was enabled to follow the meaning of words."